GOING, GOING, GONE...

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tropical forests

The disappearance of tropical forests, home to over half of all species of life on Earth, is perhaps the most significant ecological disaster we face. An area of tropical forest at least the size of Washington state is being destroyed each year, causing massive species extinctions. Many scientists now believe that current wide-scale clearing of tropical forests is contributing to a global warming trend that could make sea levels rise and flood major coastal cities. Moreover, the cultures and livelihoods of millions of forest-dwelling people are being decimated by deforestation and invasion of their lands.

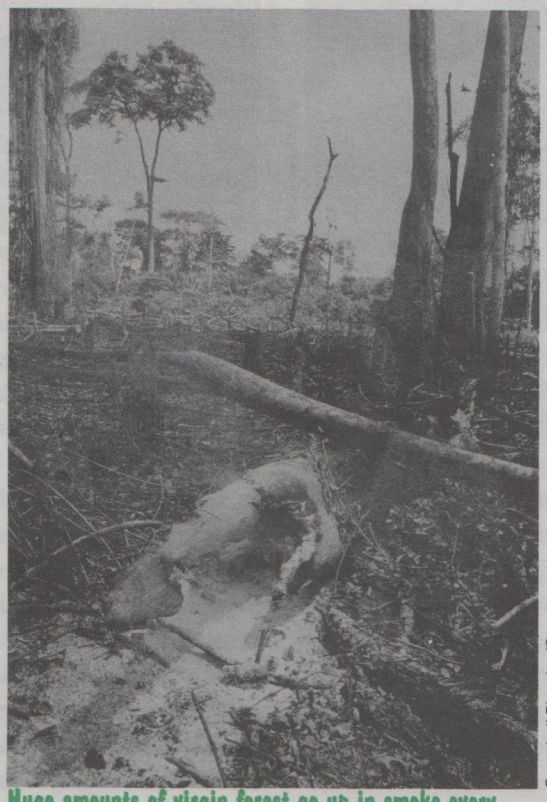
Among the major causes of deforestation are cattle ranching, logging, fuelwood collecting, mining, inappropriate agriculture and large-scale projects such as building roads and hydroelectric dams. Many of these activities are encouraged by governments that see so-called "development" of the forests as one way to solve their complex economic problems and by international interests seeking to exploit the resources of tropical forest countries.

What Are Tropical Forests?

Tropical forests are located in a loose belt that wraps around the equator, generally between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. These forests, found in Latin America, Southeast Asia and Africa, are among the world's oldest continuous ecosystems. Some forests go back 100 million years. While they encompass only 6% of the Earth's surface area, tropical forests probably contain at least half of the world's 5 to 30 million species. The most widespread and biologically rich tropical forests are rainforests, which receive high average amounts of rainfall. The world's largest area of rainforest lies in the Amazon region of South America. Tropical rainforests are home to 90% of the world's primates, two-thirds of all known plant species, 40% of birds of prey and at least 80% of the world's insects.

Many of the products we use in modern society originate in the tropics. These include:

- Industrial products like resins, rattans, essential oils and latex (used for making rubber);
- Foods such as bananas, rice, eggplant, coffee, lemons, peanuts and chocolate. Moreover, many domestic crops are crossbred with wild varieties to increase their resistance to disease;
- Medicines and life-saving drugs like curare (a paralyzing drug vital for use in surgery), diosgenin (an active ingredient in birth control pills) and drugs to treat cancer, malaria and heart disease.



Campbell Plowden/Greenpeace

Huge amounts of virgin forest go up in smoke every year when they are burned to grow crops or create cattle pastures on poor soils.

Dire Consequences

The value and importance of tropical forests cannot be measured simply by the economic goods they produce. In addition to being a storehouse of species diversity and scientific discoveries, tropical forests play vital roles in global and local climate patterns. The consequences of tropical forest destruction include:

Global Warming—Burning tropical forests and fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide and other gases into the Earth's atmosphere. These gases capture the heat reflected from the Earth's surface and cause a gradual warming of the atmosphere. Called the "greenhouse effect," this global warming could cause sea levels to rise and climate zones to shift. Consequences of these changes could include flooding of major coastal cities and the drying up of North

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There may be as many as 30 million species of life on the planet. Most of them are insects that live in the rainforest.

America's productive grain belts. The burning of tropical forests accounts for about 20% of the global human output of carbon dioxide.

Loss of Species—Tropical deforestation is now dooming 50,000 species of plants and animals to extinction every year. This frightening genetic erosion includes a loss of important resources for foods, medicines and industrial products. The complex relationships between species, especially on a global scale, are not well understood, but some biologists compare each extinction to another rivet on an airplane popping off. One can easily foresee the consequences of losing too many rivets.

Disruption of Ecological Cycles—On a local level, tropical forests regulate the hydrologic cycle by both creating and absorbing rainfall; disrupting the cycle causes more extreme climatic conditions like droughts and floods. Deforestation also leads to erosion and siltation of rivers and oceans. The silt can ruin drinking and irrigation water supplies, destroy fish breeding areas and kill marine habitats like coral reefs.

Loss of Forest Peoples' Cultures—An estimated 140 million people live within the world's tropical forests. Survival of their diverse cultures is directly threatened by tropical deforestation. Tribal groups are impacted by forced displacements, destruction of the natural resource base of the forest and encroachments on traditional lands by settlers and industrial activities. Through lifestyles ranging from nomadic hunting and gathering to farming, many forest dwellers have existed for generations without detriment to the ecosystem.

Why Such Destruction?

The causes of tropical deforestation are complex and involve government, private and military interests on national and multinational levels. Developing nations, which face problems such as skyrocketing foreign debts and rapidly growing populations, see their forests as a means to gain capital or provide land and livelihood. Recent studies indicate that the rate of deforestation has increased by 50% in the past decade. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization now estimates that every year 42 million acres of tropical forests are being destroyed. An additional 33 million acres are being seriously degraded. This means that *every minute* another 141 acres are lost. The following are some major causes of tropical forest destruction.

Commercial Logging—The timber industry is responsible for approximately 25% of tropical deforestation. Only a small fraction of the timber is produced in an ecologically sustainable way. The impact of logging the forest extends beyond the area where trees are cut. Logging roads open up previously impenetrable forests to peasant farmers and ranchers, thus logging becomes the first of several waves of deforestation. Conflicts between loggers and tribal people have become increasingly common and severe.

Cattle Ranching—In the past, cattle ranching has accounted for at least 7,700 square miles of forest loss per year in Latin America. In Central America, rainforests are cleared to create cattle pastures needed to produce cheap beef for regional consumption and for export. In many cases, cattle ranching is promoted by government tax incentives and support from foreign banks and aid agencies.

International Lending—Major financial institutions like the World Bank use tax money from the US and other donor countries to fund large-scale development projects in tropical forest countries. These include hydroelectric dams, mining schemes, monoculture plantations of exotic trees and cash crops, colonization and road-building projects that open the forest to uncontrolled settlement and land speculation. Indigenous people have often been forced off their land by such projects. Many grand schemes have ultimately failed because they degraded a natural resource base or created social problems in which the costs were far greater than any short-term profits generated by the projects. By ignoring environmental considerations, such short-sighted economic policies are steadily aggravating the debt burdens of many developing countries.

Monoculture Plantations—Significant areas of tropical forests have been converted to large plantations of cash crops for export. These include rubber, cacao (for making chocolate), coffee, bananas and palm oil. More recently, diverse natural forests have been cleared to put in monocultural stands of exotic trees (mostly pine and eucalyptus) to feed pulp and paper mills.

Shifting Agriculture—Throughout the tropics, millions of people seek their livelihood by farming the forest. Driven there by government incentives, uneven land distribution and poverty, many practice agricultural methods unsuited to fragile and infertile tropical soils. Their crop yields often decline after only a few years, forcing them to clear more forest and start the cycle again.

Fuelwood Collection—In many countries with dry tropical forests, primarily in Africa, collecting wood for cooking or heating has a major impact on dwindling forests. This

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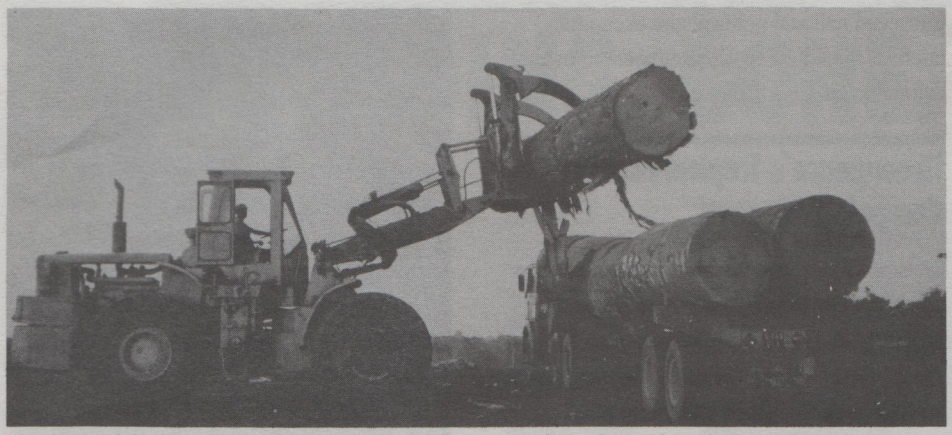
Burning down tropical forests to create cattle pastures is the leading cause of deforestation in Latin America.



Campbell Plowden/Greenpeace

Commercial logging takes a heavy toll on rainforests throughout the tropics. Logging roads open new areas to invasion by farmers.

situation points out the need to address problems of poverty, population pressures, agricultural practices and the environment in an integrated fashion.

Multinational Interests—The fate of tropical forests often lies in the hands of powerful foreign corporations that want to exploit what is in or under the forest. From Central America to Southeast Asia, multinational corporations have razed forests to harvest timber and minerals and to install fruit and paper pulp plantations. Foreign investments in tropical countries often benefit only the foreign investor and seriously damage the forests' ecology and prevent original forest dwellers from carrying out traditional sustainable activities.

Military Activities—Wars in tropical forest countries like Burma, Nicaragua and Vietnam have taken their toll directly by deforestation and inadvertently by diverting valuable resources away from environmental and social programs. In some countries, military policies that open up undisturbed tracts of forest in the name of national security go hand in hand with multinational interests that want to exploit forest resources.

Illegal Drugs—Coca and opium production also accounts for deforestation, particularly in Latin America. Herbicidal eradication programs proposed by the US could potentially exacerbate the problem, since growers have only to clear new areas to continue production.

Towards A Solution

As the political, economic, social and environmental factors that drive tropical deforestation become better understood, efforts to preserve tropical forests will increase. No one simple approach is going to solve the deforestation issue, but some tactics being used are listed below. Most importantly, environmentalists should support the efforts of indigenous people to gain legal title to their lands. In general, an area will be more strongly defended by a group of forest dwellers who have a direct interest in maintaining the integrity of the forest for their livelihoods than a small underpaid staff of forest guards. Ultimately, however, large areas can be saved only if the forces driving deforestation are addressed through reform of political and economic factors that affect forest use practices.

Extractive Reserves—In the Brazilian Amazon, traditional forest dwellers are obtaining official designation of areas called extractive reserves where they can further develop sustainable collections of rubber, nuts and other forest products. Extractive reserves received international attention when their foremost advocate, the rubber tapper leader, Chico Mendes, was murdered in late 1988 after years of conflict with cattle ranchers.

Indigenous Peoples' Movements—Many native peoples are gaining international attention for asserting their rights to their traditional territories. In Sarawak, Malaysia, nomadic hunter gatherers such as the Penan have nonviolently blockaded logging activities that are destroying the forests they have no legal rights to but have lived in for thousands of years. Even official indigenous reserves, however, do not guarantee forest protection as is evident in Brazil where tribal groups are constantly battling invasion of designated reserves by miners, loggers and dam builders.

National Parks and Biosphere Reserves—Some areas of tropical forest are being set aside as national parks or biosphere reserves. Problems have arisen, however, when forest dwellers have been removed from such areas without their consent or without considering alternate ways for them to make their living that will not degrade the surrounding environment. In addition, many parks exist only on government maps, and neither political will nor resources are sufficient to protect parks from destructive incursions.

Consumer and Citizen Campaigns—As a result of a boycott campaign in the US, Burger King agreed to halt the use of rainforest beef in its hamburgers. Citizen campaigns in the US, United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands have persuaded many city and state governments and companies to stop using non-sustainably produced tropical timber. In order to be effective, consumer campaigns need to be integrated into conservation strategies endorsed by non-governmental groups in tropical countries. To promote the transition towards sustainable timber production, a new group called the Forest Stewardship Council is developing a mechanism to certify that timber was produced without negative environmental and social impact.

Debt for Nature Swaps—Many countries facing billion dollar foreign debts are selling off their forest resources to pay back their loans. Some conservationists have engineered purchases of portions of developing countries'

Campbell Plowden/Greenpeace

As tropical forests disappear, indigenous people like this Yanomano Indian from Venezuela lose their homes and culture. We all lose these peoples' knowledge of rainforest plants and their medicinal properties.

foreign debt in return for tropical forest conservation programs. While debt swaps seem promising, they are controversial and have limits. Some governments view these types of proposals as affronts to their national sovereignty and as catalysts to greater inflation. Moreover, the long-term viability of these conservation projects is in jeopardy if local people, most affected by what happens in the forest, are not fully involved in the debt swap process. Beyond small-scale debt swaps, tropical countries need large-scale debt relief to reduce the severe environmental stress placed on their forests.

Institutional Initiatives and Reform—Due to international pressure from conservationists, institutions like the World Bank and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization are beginning to reexamine their programs that affect tropical forests. The Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP), intended to be an international forum for coordinated action on tropical deforestation, has stalled following criticism of its top-down approach and its emphasis on traditional forestry approaches that fail to address the root causes of deforestation. The members of the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) have adopted the year 2000 as a target date for converting the trade in tropical timber to sustainable sources but so far no concrete mechanisms have been established to implement this goal.

Legislation—US and European lawmakers are proposing a variety of legislation to promote tropical forest conservation by labeling tropical timber products or providing funds to support beneficial projects. Some tropical countries are reducing tax subsidies on activities that destroy forests and granting land rights to indigenous peoples and other groups of traditional forest dwellers. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, there was a lot of discussion about global "forest principles", but so far the world's governments have not been able to transcend national political and economic interests to make a real commitment to halting deforestation.

Greenpeace's Tropical Forests Campaign

Greenpeace is committed to using its resources to tackle the dynamic and complex issue of preserving the world's tropical forests. Greenpeace's initial priorities at the international level are to reduce the negative impact of commercial logging and development aid on tropical forests. The Greenpeace office in Brazil is focusing on mahogany harvesting and destructive mining. An effort will also be made to promote land reform to take pressure off vulnerable forest areas. In the US, Greenpeace is preparing a major report on the US tropical timber trade as a prelude to launching a campaign to reduce consumption of non-sustainably produced tropical timber in this country.

What You Can Do

To preserve tropical forests we need your help. Here are some suggestions.

✓ Join the Greenpeace Rainforest Action Team. Send your name, address and phone number to the address on the front of this fact sheet if you would like to be kept informed about letter writing campaigns, key legislation or other local activities geared towards tropical forest campaign activities.

✓ Contact Congress and ask them to support strong legislation protecting tropical forests.

Honorable (your Representative)
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable (your Senator)
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Campbell Plowden/Greenpeace

A Brazilian rubber tapper at work. Collecting latex from rubber trees in natural forests is one way to harvest a rainforest product without destroying the forest.

✓ Write to the President of the World Bank and urge him to halt funding for development projects that destroy tropical forests and harm tribal peoples. Ask him to support more environmentally beneficial projects such as extractive reserves and energy conservation.

Lewis T. Preston, President
The World Bank
1818 H Street, NW
Washington, DC 20433

✓ Become a conscientious consumer of rainforest products. Ask store merchants what impact their food, wood or other items produced in the tropics had on the forests. You can survey the use of tropical timber in your community and share the results with us to build the tropical timber campaign. Write to Greenpeace for a Tropical Timber Survey Kit.

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